

Celebrating his 90th, Studs gets earful from his friends

Studs Terkel turned 90 last Thursday. Mayor Richard M. Daley declared it "Studs Terkel Day" — a day that featured a series of events honoring the Pulitzer-winning oral historian, author and radio personality. Below are excerpts from a celebration at the Chicago Historical Society, where guests alternately gushed over and roasted Terkel.



Author and radio star Garrison Keillor

It's so good to come and honor a great American radioman and a fellow wearer of red socks.

... And it's so great to be here with Studs. I've never seen him be this quiet, for this long. That's why all of us came, so we'd have a chance to talk [thunderous applause].

When I was interviewed by Studs on his show, he met me in the lobby and he seemed very excited. I thought he was excited to see me, but he was excited to be on the radio and to be doing his show. We sat down in the studio and he asked me a question and because I'm from Minnesota, I have a habit of pausing to give the illusion of deep thought. Studs leaped into every one of those pauses. He basically interviewed himself. It was a great performance. I was nothing but the straight man.

He went on WFMT, did blues and jazz and then started reading passages from his favorite authors. And soon, authors were part of the show and it became an interview show. Studs has always pretended to be hard of hearing so that he doesn't have to take calls from listeners. He could do the show in his own way...

He's a scrapper, a fighter and that's why it's not good to honor him too much or to pour the sauce over him too thick, because it would kill him. This man did not get to be 90 years old by accepting honorary doctorates.

This is what we want, to be 90 and still be signing book contracts and to be enjoying a good martini and to appreciate beautiful women. And to sit in a bar with a beautiful woman, celebrating your new book and drinking your second martini. And her right hand has somehow come to rest on your left knee. And she's whispering to you, but because you're hard of hearing, you're not quite sure what she's saying. And then you realize she's saying what you think she's saying, which is, "Talk to me. Talk to me. Speak."

Filmmaker Haskell Wexler

I had the fun of sitting with Studs last night and having us yell at each another's hearing aids.

I met Studs when I was in high school. He was an actor and director in a group called the Chicago Repertory Theater, sort of a left-wing theater. One day, they were rehearsing "Waiting for Lefty" ... and Studs was storming up and down the stage muttering, "Goddamn fascists, goddamn fascists."

They were not lines in the play. What had happened was Mussolini's government ... had flown some navy officers [over] in

flying boats, and landed on Lake Michigan. The city was going to honor them by changing the name of Seventh Street to Balbo. Seventh Street was the street the Chicago Repertory Theater was on, which pissed Studs off...

I said, "Explain to me what is fascist."

And he said, "Well, fascist is when the military and big business and the government all sort of gang up and they work together like a team. Then they usually get some clown, some joker like Mussolini to divert the people ... while they do their dirty work."

I don't know why I remembered that particular thing, but I do feel some importance of that definition in my life today.

Actor David Schwimmer

I'm sure the irony of this day is not lost on you. Here you are the champion of the common man being fawned over and congratulated like some prize thoroughbred. When I heard they were doing this for you, I thought you'd just skip out on the whole affair ... and we'd find you grabbing a hamburger smothered in onions and a cup of coffee in some greasy spoon, sharing a laugh with the fry cook.

But then I remembered that you were an actor, which means you love a crowd. And this, after all, is an actor's dream. You're on stage all the time. You're the lead. I'll leave it up to the wiser folk who follow to talk about the tremendous contribution you've made as an oral historian to the fields of literature, history, sociology and the arts. I wanted to tell you all about Studs Terkel, television superstar.

I knew he had acted on stage and acted in film, but only recently did it come to my attention that Studs was the star of his own television series on NBC...

For weeks, I avoided watching any of the tapes for fear I'd become unhinged or jealous if, on top of all of his other accomplishments, my friend was also a better actor than me. Having recently sat through a half-dozen episodes, I can safely say that fear has been assuaged [huge laugh].

... All kidding aside, not only did I like you acting in "Studs' Place," but I and countless others undoubtedly appreciated what you were doing with that show. You not only had something that needed to be said, you were taking personal and professional risk to say it. This is one of the reasons I admire you so much, because you inspire me and so many others to take similar risks. You have always championed the common man and have been sympathetic to his struggles, many of which were tackled in "Studs' Place."

We all know Studs has a penchant for red-and-white checkered shirts. But I've never really known why, and felt foolish for asking. But there's a moment in [an] episode that suggests an explanation... [that the red-and-white tablecloth in Studs' television restaurant represents the working class]. So now, I'm realizing, after all these years that maybe Studs' ... shirt is a show of support, once again, for the common man—that he wears that tablecloth on his chest like a uniform to show he's there for them, giving voice to those who cannot be heard, making visible those who cannot be seen.

Or maybe he's just cheap.

I don't know, but I like the first one better.

Compiled by Robert K. Elder